

PROBING THE MASSACRE PROBE

THE U.S. Army last week began investigating its own investigation of the My Lai massacre. Two floors below ground level in the Pentagon's Army Operations Center, Lieut. General William R. Peers, who has been assigned to find out whether the Army originally whitewashed the affair, quizzed some of the key figures. Lieut. William Calley, charged with the murder of 109 civilians, testified for four hours, then stonily ignored questions from reporters outside the hearing room. Peers' panel also called Colonel Oran K. Henderson, commander of the brigade in which the accused C Company operated in March of 1968, and Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson Jr., a helicopter pilot who first complained about the killing of civilians in the tragic affair. Both also refused to talk to newsmen.

But one witness called by General Peers was more than willing to get his story across to the public. The man who commanded Charlie Company when it attacked My Lai, Captain Ernest Medina, appeared in Washington with flamboyant Attorney F. Lee Bailey at his side. Bailey convinced Army officials that even though other potential witnesses were under court orders not to discuss the case, Medina should be allowed publicly to refute accounts given by some members of his company about his role on that fateful morning of March 16. In a Washington press conference and a televised interview with CBS's Mike Wallace, Medina emerged as an articulate professional soldier, concerned not only about his own reputation but also about that of the Army, angry at the press for what he called its "very biased" reporting of My Lai.

Hot Landing Zone. Questioned by Wallace, Medina, 33, said flatly: "I saw no shooting of any innocent civilians

whatsoever." He also declared: "I did not receive any reports of any atrocity or any shooting of civilians inside the village." The orders he gave his men before the assault, he said, were those he had received from Lieut. Colonel Frank A. Barker Jr., commander of the task force under which Charlie Company was operating. They were, Medina explained, "instructions to destroy the village, to kill the livestock and to engage the 48th V.C. Battalion. I did not give any orders to massacre or shoot any women and children."

As Medina told newsmen, his company had expected to be outnumbered "2 to 1" by the Viet Cong soldiers in the village, and he had been told by intelligence sources that by the time of the attack all the civilians would have left the village to go to nearby markets. He said that the village was shelled by artillery for ten minutes before his company began its airmobile assault. When advance helicopters approached the village, he got a report from a pilot: "The landing zone is hot. We are receiving fire. There are V.C. with weapons running from the village."

Instinctive Firing. Medina said that he remained at the landing zone with a command group and a reserve platoon as two other platoons, including one led by Lieut. Calley, swept through the village. Medina checked out a helicopter report of a "Viet Cong with weapon," he said, and continued: "I did not see any weapon and began to turn away. As I turned, I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye, and I thought, 'Boy, you've had it—you're dead.' And instinctively, as we are trained, I fired two shots." The shots, he said, killed a woman. "I thought she might have had a gun or a grenade." Medina denied having shot any other Vietnamese that day,

including the young boy that one soldier accused him of killing.

While still outside the village, according to Medina, he got a report from his battalion headquarters that "possibly some civilians had been shot." He said that he thought the report must have come from a helicopter pilot observing the scene (presumably Thompson). Then, as he told it, he radioed his platoon leaders "to make sure that no innocent civilians were being shot." He entered the village only after the shooting stopped, or about three hours after the attack began, he recalled, and there he found "20 to 28" civilian bodies. He said that he assumed they had been killed by the artillery shelling, fire from helicopter gunships or small-arms fire on the ground. He did not inspect the entire village, he declared, and could not be sure there were no other bodies. Medina was not asked why an Army publication issued the next day claimed that "128 enemy" had been killed.

Suspicious. While Medina's account sharply challenges the stories some members of his company have related about his role in the affair, it confirms the report that Medina's immediate superiors were concerned that unnecessary killing might have taken place that day. The task-force commander, Colonel Barker, cannot be questioned, since he was killed in action three months later. Medina gives no indication that he thoroughly investigated these suspicions. He told Wallace that none of his men talked about "any atrocity" after the attack. But he also told Wallace that he had advised his men after the action "that it would be best if they did not discuss it among themselves, if they did not discuss it with anybody else, that there was an investigation being conducted, and that it should be discussed with the investigators and nobody else."

Why should so many members of Charlie Company now claim that an



MEDINA



PEERS

One was more than willing to talk.



CALLEY

atrocities did indeed occur at My Lai? Medina obliquely cited three possible reasons: "There were certain individuals who have made statements for which they have been paid. Certain dissident groups have welcomed the chance to speak out against the military. There are certain individuals I had disciplinary problems with." A 13-year veteran of Army service, Medina has earned 13 decorations, including a Silver and Bronze Star in Viet Nam. Born in Springer, N.M., he grew up with grandparents in Montrose, Colo., after his mother died when he was three months old. Apparently he rarely saw his father, now a Utah sheep rancher. Medina is married and has three children.

A major aim of the Pentagon investigation by General Peers is to find out why it took more than a year for word of the atrocity to reach Washington. One of the Pentagon's leading experts on guerrilla warfare, Peers was selected because he had commanded a division in Viet Nam but had no connection with the involved Americal Division. From what the Army has revealed so far, no suggestion that the My Lai deaths might have amounted to a massacre got past the Americal Division headquarters in Viet Nam. The only on-scene alarm seemingly was voiced by Helicopter Pilot Thompson. Within a few days, the brigade commander, Colonel Henderson, quizzed Medina and some of his troops. He reported orally to the division commander, Major General Samuel Koster, that about 20 noncombatants had been killed by advance shelling and in crossfire between U.S. and Viet Cong forces. He was asked to put that in writing on April 24, 1968. Henderson, at Koster's request, then asked Barker to investigate formally, and Barker's report, equally limited, was accepted by Koster; the report apparently did not even reach the top Army command in Saigon.

Presidential Go-Ahead. It thus seems likely that the Johnson Administration was unaware of the incident. Former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford and Vice President Hubert Humphrey state that they never heard about it while in office. Nixon's Defense Secretary, Melvin Laird, contends that not even General William Westmoreland, the American commander in Viet Nam at the time, heard about it until this year.

Washington seems to have been alerted for the first time by letters mailed on April 2, 1969, by Viet Nam Veteran Ronald Ridenhour. As Army Chief of Staff, Westmoreland ordered a full Pentagon investigation on April 23. As a result of that investigation, Laird says, he personally informed President Nixon in August that "we would have to court-martial Calley for murder—and the President told me to go right ahead." On Sept. 5, the charges were announced, but with no mention of how many killings were involved. It was not until November that journalists learned of the magnitude of the tragedy.

My Lai from Abroad

IN most countries friendly to the United States, the initial horror and revulsion over news of the My Lai massacre had by last week turned to more quiet dismay and introspection. Editorial and public response, while not forgiving, was philosophical. Typical was Milan's *Corriere della Sera*, which sadly noted: "Every country on the old continent has a fine collection of skeletons in the cupboard."

In West Germany, the magazine *Der Stern* asked Nürnberg War Crimes Prosecutor Robert Kempner, a naturalized American citizen, how My Lai would have been judged. Had there been such evidence in 1945, he said, the guilty would have been tried—no matter which parties had been involved.

The fact that the U.S. Government was finally—and firmly—coming to grips with the crime impressed many. At the NATO ministerial conference in Brussels, Secretary of State William Rogers acknowledged the Administration's shock and expressed hope that justice would be served.

British press and politicians had reacted immediately, and emotionally, to the massacre. The editor of the liberal, antiwar *New Statesman* wrote that "responsibility for the Pinkville massacre—and for how many others?—lies squarely with the American nation as a whole." By contrast, *The Economist* rationalized that whenever a country goes to war, "it is statistically almost inevitable that some of its men will do something atrocious."

The vociferous left wing of Prime Minister Wilson's Labor Party is trying to pressure him into dissociating Britain from U.S. policy in Viet Nam. Public reaction was relatively mild. The American embassy received only about 50 letters.

The Communist world was predictably condemnatory. In Moscow, a statement was signed by 24 Soviet intellectuals, including Composer Dmitri Shostakovich and Nobel Physicist Nikolai Semenov. The words chosen by these brilliant men were singularly shrill: "The U.S. military followed in the tracks of the Nazi criminals." In East Germany, about 50,000 youths gathered to protest the American presence in Viet Nam. The Peking press made do with reprinting the official Hanoi government line berating the U.S. for killing "suckling babies and disemboweling pregnant women."

In the end, if any reaction to the massacre of My Lai was shared by honest men, it was that the world expects the worst from warriors—even American warriors. "We have had our share of atrocities," declared the *Japan Times*. My Lai was yet another "grisly example of the brutalization that overtakes men in war."